

**Through the Looking Glass:
Videographic Criticism and Activism
in *Transformers: The Premake*.**

Clair Richards



fig.1. Screenshot from *Transformers: The Premake*, Kevin B. Lee, 2014.

<https://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy/videos/94101046>.



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Through the Looking Glass: Videographic Criticism and Activism in *Transformers: The Premake*.

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ABSTRACT:

Videographic criticism has emerged as an innovative form of critical analysis of film since the digital innovation brought about by the online film sharing websites YouTube and Vimeo in the early 2000's. However, videographic criticism, although popular has made slow progress in its attempts to assert itself in the world of contemporary film criticism. This thesis seeks to locate videographic criticism in contemporary film criticism by examining the state of contemporary film criticism by using Kevin B. Lee's 2014 video essay, *Transformers: The Premake* as a case study. This thesis will begin by demonstrating that videographic criticism is a reflexive and relevant method for the production of film criticism. It will further examine how videographic criticism uses techniques associated with compactness and condensation to create arguments. In examining these methods, this thesis will finally interrogate the relevance of videographic criticism to contemporary media analysis and film criticism. Thus, this thesis finds the videographic criticism to be an effective and innovative way to produce meaningful, rich film criticism.

KEYWORDS: videographic criticism, video essay; contemporary film criticism; condensation, compactness.

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Introduction

This is an investigation into the methods that videographic criticism has used to establish its position in contemporary film theory and criticism. Film theory and criticism continues to be dominated by the written formats, whether this takes the form of printed and (more recently) online journals and books, but in this thesis I will argue that, when understood in terms of communicative efficiency and economy of time and attention, videographic criticism has successfully asserted its position in contemporary film theory and criticism. I will argue that it is in the particular power of videographic criticism to condense arguments, ideas and critical theories that provides them with their right to claim their place in contemporary film theory and criticism.

The terms videographic criticism and video essay are difficult to define and are frequently interchangeable, but for the purposes of this thesis I will use the term videographic criticism since the differences between the two are sometimes subjective, arbitrary and exist primarily as unsubstantiated ideas. Catherine Grant offers a number of options to describe “this nascent form of multi-media composition” in the online Creator’s Statement of *[in]Transition, Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*. At its launch, *[in]Transition* was “the first peer-reviewed academic periodical specifically given over to videographic film and moving image studies”. Grant expands upon these terms to include “the “video essay”, “audiovisual essay”, and “visual essay”. The journal seeks to “create a context” for the understanding and validation of videographic criticism as a “new mode of scholarly writing”. In common with traditional written film theory, videographic criticism is a means to interrogate and discuss debates around film history and theory but the most obvious difference is that videographic criticism uses film as both the source and the material for the making and elaboration of arguments, and to establish positions in contemporary debates. It is

my assertion that the medium of film, in the form of videographic criticism is the rational, logical and obvious medium in which to discuss ideas and theories about film.

In Chapter One I will examine the state of contemporary film criticism in order to substantiate this claim. I will interrogate the idea of what contemporary film criticism is and I will attempt to identify the qualities that define videographic criticism and investigate how it (might) fit into contemporary film criticism. In Chapter Two I will examine film criticism as activism in *Transformers: The Premake* in the context of the work as an example of the capacity of videographic criticism to condense arguments and meaning.

Videographic criticism is a means to interrogate and discuss debates around film history and theory that shares qualities in common with traditionally published forms of written film theory, but videographic criticism differs in that it uses film as both the source and the material for the making and elaboration of arguments and to establish positions in contemporary debates. In *Le Camera-Stylo* Christian Keathley describes video essays at their best as being the product of an “extraordinary combination – a simultaneous faithfulness to the object of study and an imaginative use of it” that can deliver criticism in a “new presentational context” that creates a new figurative space where the “cinematic object of study and critical commentary about it can be aligned” (183, 190),

It is my assertion that the medium of film, in the form of videographic criticism is the rational, logical and obvious medium in which to discuss and engage with ideas and theories about film.

Videographic criticism has its origins in remix or compilation film making. In his critical re-reading of Jay Leyda’s monogram, *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film* (1964), Bill Nichols uses the terms “compilation films” and “found footage” to describe the form. The act of producing remix or compilation films was rooted in celluloid, much of it

was constructed from found footage. One of the first examples of remix filmmaking was *Rose Hobart*, directed by Joseph Cornell in 1936. *Rose Hobart* was a re-edited take on the feature film *East of Borneo* in 1936. Found footage was not held in critical high regard and was described by Nichols as “a largely neglected, secondary consideration” (146). The idea of the recirculated image as being depleted and of less value is discussed and refuted by Hito Steyerl in her paper that seeks to defend the “poor image” (1). In her identification of the hierarchy of the image which places the projection of films in a cinema at the top, all other images are considered to be of lesser value. Thus when films like *Rose Hobart*, that were created primarily from discarded reels, frames or offcuts of film that was scavenged from film processing houses and film studios was re-cut into a new form, it was perceived as lacking the immediacy of the filming of “a defining act” and was not the subject of serious critical evaluation until Leyda’s consideration in *Films Beget Films* (146).

In the era before digitisation, remix and compilation film productions were eventually circulated in film or video format, but the impact of this circulation and distribution could not be compared to the reach, accessibility and power of the contemporary internet based film and video sharing sites. The initial practice of remix or compilation films demanded the practitioner have a proximity to the media: physicality; a presence local to the sources of film but this was short lived. As the production and reproduction of film gathered pace and popularity, film footage was archived and became, in Nichol’s words a “rapidly accumulating resource” (146).

The ability to engage in compilation or remix film making was, for a short period, bound by and limited to specific locations and times in a way that is difficult to imagine in the world of digital abundance that surrounds us today. The physical products of remix filmmaking could easily be reproduced, distributed and circulated and this reach expanded again after VCR video recorders became accessible to consumers in the late 1970’s and early

1980's. As a mode of audiovisual expression, remix and compilation films were still limited to the avant-garde and those with the means to access the hardware and skills that the manipulation and editing of physical media required. The rise of the VCR and its impact on the circulation of commercial and non-commercial materials was in some ways an unintended consequence of the Supreme Court ruling in 1984 that rejected the claims of the Universal City Studios, Inc. against Sony Corp. of America because of their role in the development, manufacture and production of the Betamax video format.¹ Universal City Studio's assertion that the VCR was a tool to facilitate the perpetration of a crime, i.e. the illicit copying and reproduction of materials that were subject to copyright was rejected in favour of an acceptance of a protected definition of "fair use".

In *Remix*, Lawrence Lessig posits that it was the acceptance of the "non-infringing uses" that prevented the outlawing of the video technology and opened the way for the producers of copyrighted materials to extract massive profits from the home entertainment markets (123). Videographic criticism gradually became more accessible and widespread but it was the digital and audiovisual revolution that followed the creation of *Vimeo* in 2004 and the launch of *YouTube* in 2005 that changed the face of the form. This new era of videographic criticism, that came after digital re-birth of media was a product of the simultaneous improvements in home computer processors, reproducible media such as the DVD-R(W) and memory capacity, the introduction of high speed internet and the ready availability of films to use as source material on DVD and Blu-Ray in combination with the presence of online opportunities to publicly or privately display the videos will be the focus of this thesis.

The digital and physical technological revolutions at the start of the 21st century made it possible for videographic criticism to enter cultural, critical and, eventually, academic

¹ The US Supreme Court ruling can be found here, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/464/417/>

discourse. These technological developments created the environment that encouraged the circulation and proliferation of idea that film could be studied and subjected to critical and theoretical concepts through using the medium of film itself. Videographic criticism expanded into an open, accessible and practical format as the decade progressed. As film theory matured, the idea that film could be both the subject and the medium through which it is discussed and understood was finally possible and readily available to those without physical access to developed and processed celluloid film and specialist film editing and projection equipment.

Videographic criticism exists in numerous forms and formats and can be found on an ever-expanding number of platforms. In this sense it is impossible to ignore the reach and impact of films that are published and sometimes immediately circulated on the most popular social media platforms: *Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube* and *Vimeo* to name but a few. Film and responses to film are everywhere, in almost every hand and in every pocket and home. The internet has created opportunity for practitioners of videographic criticism to form communities of interest. Today, the practice of scholarly videographic criticism is associated with a number of geographical locations: Middlebury College in Vermont, USA, Merz Akademie, University of Applied Art, Design and Media, Stuttgart in Germany and Birkbeck, University of London in the UK.

The case study that I will focus on can be found in many locations online and also in the *Audiovisualcy* group on *Vimeo.com*.² *Transformers: The Premake (a desktop documentary)* was created by Kevin B. Lee in 2014 and is one of the three featured videos on the *Audiovisualcy* front page.³ This informal group is described as “an online forum for video essays and works of audiovisual screen studies that have an analytical, critical, reflexive or

² <https://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy>

³ <https://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy/videos/94101046>

scholarly purpose”.⁴ The group was created by Catherine Grant in 2011 as a virtual meeting space for practitioners and spectators of videographic criticism. *Audiovisualcy* is a diverse group that has 2025 members and 76 moderators. The membership comprises academics, students and film makers and interested individuals using the space to explore and articulate many of the questions and debates that populate contemporary film theory and criticism.

Vimeo users can register and upload a limited number of videos at no cost.

Registration also enables users to join groups, to follow their selected practitioners, comment on uploaded films, ‘like’ and communicate with fellow users. Generally practitioners of videographic criticism that are members of the *Audiovisualcy* group are not geographically or academically bound to specific institutions or locations. For a practitioner that is producing or working with videographic criticism it is irrelevant where they are in the world provided they have access to the internet, simple film editing software, an enquiring mind and sources of filmic material available to them. This is sufficient material for a practitioner to begin to construct an argument or suggest that it is time for a fresh approach to understanding or to draw attention to an aspect or an example of film making.

I will argue that through the techniques that have developed and by using the medium of videographic criticism can position themselves at the heart of theoretical and cultural debates, while asking questions and drawing attention to overlooked aspects of film theory in a compact way. The idea of compact I refer to here is defined by Hesselberth and Poulaki as the “shortening of the distance between the various components of the cinematic configuration” (3). Videographic criticism reduces the availability of ideological space between different branches of the visual arts and the media as it draws practical and theoretical elements together in one compact space. When considering *Transformers: The Premake* in the context of compact cinematics, we make space for the idea of hypermediation

⁴ Description of the group taken from the front page of the group, <https://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy>

of the contemporary human experience that expresses itself in the need to record, document and share these “short, condensed, compressed, miniature and compacted cinematic artifacts” (12) that form most of the visual substance of *Transformers : The Premake*. This difference in practice challenges the traditional approaches to film theory and laid the foundations for the theoretical approach to film criticism that has become videographic criticism.

Film criticism and theory in the form of text remains the dominant mode of publication for academics, film theorists and critics alike, but for those that wish to transfer their arguments, theoretical and methodological frameworks to videographic criticism there are a myriad of both paid and free software options that allow those that lack the skills of a seasoned film maker to take their selected source film, edit, make visual comparisons and draw attention to aspects of the film that they would previously have expressed in words. Fair use regulations and the copyright and licensing exceptions that are made for the use of films as sources for academic purposes circumvent the need for permission from rights holders and liberate the makers of videographic criticism and video essays in the same way as academic writing. It is only the final product, the (potential) audience, its reach and how it is understood or interpreted that differs.

Videographic criticism complements established methods of research and provides a space where new insights that are revealed by close readings of cinematic texts can be swiftly investigated using visual means. It is in the new uses for established forms of critical and visual expression that videographic criticism offers that allows it to claim its place in film and cultural studies. In videographic criticism the close reading of the cinematic is not translated into words that are associated and supported by theories, but is expressed in sequences of film that are used to make or support theories and arguments or seek to analyse the content, find and ask and answer new questions about the character of the moving images and within that the nature of the human experience. The act of research, the preparation for making a work of

videographic criticism is, in many ways, the same as the preparation for the writing of a traditional paper or essay but the essential difference is the specific nature of the attention that is paid to the source material and its transformation into the critical expression in visual form.

Videographic criticism is not an illustration of an idea or an artistic expression of the creator's response to the source film; it is a critical response expressed in visual form. To paraphrase Laura Mulvey when she speaks of the changes in perception caused by the potential to "delay" that were brought about by the DVD in *Death 24x a Second*, it is in the new ways of simultaneously seeing and thinking about the cinematic that videographic criticism reveals its critical potential (8). Information is gathered and positioned within a theoretical framework. The editing of sequences of film take the place of text to make and support arguments allows videographic criticism to operate in a more expressive register; one that reveals and interrogates filmic texts in a compact and rhythmic way. Whether this is purely visual, slowed down or speeded up, or supplemented by sound from the source film or supported with on screen text or voice over, it is in the condensed nature of the methods that videographic criticism offers the opportunity to present theory and source simultaneously. Videographic criticism bypasses the before and after that dominates the traditional approach to film studies. The viewer does not have to attempt to imagine or remember the film that is the subject of the videographic criticism, or actively seek out the themes or aspects of the film that the text refers to because they are presented simultaneously. It is this 'here' and 'now' aspect of videographic criticism that I suggest is an essential component that has, until now been absent from film criticism. This, along with the condensation of simultaneously constructed arguments by use of visual means is that which distinguishes videographic criticism from other (traditional) methods of film criticism and analysis.

Chapter one: What is Contemporary Film Criticism?

Introduction

In order to create the best possible environment for a better understanding of videographic criticism to emerge from this investigation, it is first necessary to attempt to answer the following questions: what is contemporary film criticism? Is there a place for videographic criticism in contemporary film criticism? And finally, if there is a place for videographic criticism in contemporary film criticism, where is that?

1.1 The Current State of Contemporary Film Criticism

As has long been the case, there is much discussion around the current state of contemporary film criticism among critics but it is rarely discussed in a comprehensive way by academics. Many of the dominant ideas and debates around contemporary film criticism are discussed extensively in *Film Criticism in the Digital Age*, edited by Mattias Frey and Cecilia Sayed. Sayed and Frey seek to identify and locate what precisely the essence of film criticism is, in a contemporary context, and provide an overview of the most dominant issues and the most damaging omissions.

In the introduction Frey describes the present state of film criticism where film critics continually return to the ontological and existential questions about the purpose and the cultural value of their collective contribution to the contemporary dialogue on film and media and the debates on whether it is a worthwhile activity. The idea that film critics should be perpetually engaged in self-reflection and interrogate the nature of their work underlines a series of presumptions about the fragile nature of the relationship between the producers of media objects and the producers of criticism. The film critics' collective uncertainty regarding the necessity of the continued existence of the film criticism industry that pays critics for their insights in any form has taken the form of a near permanent state. In his observations of the

urgency of film criticism's perpetual need to return to these questions he suggests that film critics and criticism might remedy these concerns by attending to what he considers to be the deficiencies and omissions in their work.

1.2 The “five interlocking debates” in Contemporary Film Criticism

Frey suggests that film critics can address these issues by engaging themselves in investigating the “five interlocking debates” (1). The issues are:

Should evaluation be a function of criticism or even its principle aim?

What should be the nature of the relationship between the critic and his or her audience?

How have the new media changed film criticism as an activity and form?

How have new media changed film criticism as a professional institution?

Who can be a critic? Has criticism become more “democratic”?

Frey identifies one of the key weaknesses in contemporary film criticism as being the tendency to assume an embattled mind-set. This addresses the situation in which the critics' consistent failure to define a definite and concrete role for themselves leaves them prone to becoming embroiled in ontological debates that lead to unresolvable circular arguments and the laying of blame. The numerous threats to, and the impending death of cinema as an art form and thus the death of film criticism, have dominated discussions on criticism since the invention of the moving image and the critical response to every new development follows the same well-worn path. In his discussion of the threat to the idea of what cinema really is and means that is posed by digital technology, Frey's investigations only raise ever more questions on what precisely the role of film criticism is within this debate, while the history of film criticism tends to be dominated by biographies of the most prominent film critics (2).

Frey asks, should film critics perform evaluations of film and should evaluation be the principle aim of the contemporary film critic? Is it time to attempt to define the essence of

what film criticism really is? Frey questions whether the role of the critic should be concerned with “education”, whether the business of “refining the taste of the audience; personal or artistic expression; creating a dialogue with an audience or enlivening a public sphere; describing, deciphering, demystifying, contextualising or categorising the work or its relationship to society; or simply judging the aesthetic or entertainment value of the examined cultural product” (2). Here Frey’s observations illustrate the critical landscape as being one that is populated by pockets of uncertainty that are frequently lacking in critical resistance and are more often concerned with the security of their own future existence.

Contemporary film criticism appears to be a confused field that, on one hand regards itself as the victim of contemporary ideas, but on the other is certain of the superiority of their position when compared to the implications of the practice of cultural studies’ that follows the approach that “all cultural products are equally worthy of serious enquiry” (4). When attempting to define the audience/critic relationship Frey struggles to decide whether the film critic should take the role of a “gatekeeper” or “mediator” (4). He articulates ideas around an apparent enthusiasm that exists within critical discourse for a “powerful critical authority figure who will guide the reader from a position of superior knowledge” (5). This strikes me as being a curious attachment to an outdated, outmoded patriarchal structure, but in itself it is not surprising since the persuasive power of patriarchy has long resided in its traditions, its consistency and its resistance to even the smallest of changes.

It is worth qualifying the use of the word “change” here, since from the perspective of the apparently embattled and predominantly male film critics, change, in these circumstances refers to the symbolic death of the critic or “an end to the communicative mediation between a learned authority and a willing, engaged reader” (6). If we accept the premise of the “death” of the traditional, authoritative critic as a distinct and identifiable moment in the history of film criticism we could be forgiven for harbouring the expectation that the content and quality

of film criticism after that point should be dramatically different from what went before, I see little evidence of these changes having occurred.⁵ Frey suggests that it was the emergence of the “new media” online in the form of *Twitter* and film blogs that changed the nature and practice of film criticism as it became “shorter, more immediate and less considered” (7). The digital revolution and the social and technological innovations that gave rise to “the new film criticism” made film criticism as a whole, less professional and more instant after the changes. The implication here is that the essential structure that underpinned the foundations of film criticism have changed but that the new, formal structures still encouraged the collaboration of the previous generation of film critics. I would argue that this was more of a shift or a change of location, or a change of rhythm, than the creation of a unique and an entirely new environment for critical discourse around film.

When Frey questions how the institution of film criticism has been changed by the new media, his choice of language is interesting. He refers to “film criticism as a professional institution” which, by implication, suggests that film criticism was, until the advent of digital media, an organised, standardised cultural operation that was unified in its standards of professionalism, its purpose, beliefs, operational systems and aims. Frey’s sentimentalised view of the now largely lost world of printed, commercial film criticism and the security offered by the patriarchal voice of authority, with its associated purpose, occupation and income that it provided for their critics and the films that were their focus, is presented as a “business failure” and not an indicative consequence of the “fragmentation” or the natural destruction of the outdated and culturally obsolete power structures (11).

The language that Frey uses to describe the idea of what film criticism once was harks back to the era of pre-feminist film criticism. A time where one learned gentleman could

⁵From McDonald, Ronan. *The Death of the Critic*. Bloomsbury, 2007.

present his well-considered views to his peers, who would also be learned gentlemen, engaged in the dignified activity of sharing their insights with their submissive but nonetheless receptive and appreciative audience that, although they may have disagreed, would allow their perspectives to pass largely unchallenged.

Frey moves his interrogation towards the question of who can be a critic and questions whether film criticism is, by its nature alone, now more “democratic” (12). He suggests that the shift in power structures in the decline of the printed forms of film criticism along with the rise of digital forced has those engaged in writing film criticism to “reflect up on the unexamined past of criticism and re-evaluate the make-up of the profession” (13). His observations are remarkable in that the apparent steps that were made by the feminist film theorists Laura Mulvey and Annette Kuhn should be so easily overlooked, but that is indicative and illustrative of the heady atmosphere of the “traditional dominant white patriarchy” at work (13).

He observes that digital film criticism has finally made space for “niche demographics” that in turn opened new dialogues and perspectives that eventually created new points of access and virtual communities (13). Frey goes on to suggest that film criticism itself is a multifaceted act of mediation acting between the society and the culture and between the “cultural object and an audience” (14). Mindful of the changes that have occurred in film criticism, Frey suggests that the distinctions that exist between “salaried academic and paid-per-article writers” are not just based upon “petty rivalries” but can better be regarded as symbols of the real distinctions that exist between those with an academic interest in film criticism and those that seek to monetise their labours more directly (16). Frey describes an informal hierarchy that loosely follows the traditional patriarchal, authoritative structure with the academic and salaried or traditionally employed critics at the top with the per-paper and enthusiastic amateur new media critics.

Frey is eager to illustrate the chasm that exists between traditionally published film criticism and the forms of film criticism that are published digitally and amateur film criticism. When Frey overlooks videographic criticism in his assessment of contemporary film criticism it does not invalidate the medium, nor is it a denial of its material existence but it does make the task of positioning videographic criticism within the landscape of contemporary film criticism more problematic.

Does this omission mean that videographic criticism is a marginal concern that exists on the outskirts of film theory or would it be more realistic to presume that the omission was a simple matter of academic ease and focal selection? Whatever the motivation, the omission reveals that there are parallels that can be drawn with regard to the act of limiting our attention to film criticism in its printed or digital forms. That videographic criticism exists and that the ontological debates around indexicality and the validity of the image in analogue filmmaking over the digital continue to fascinate critics and scholars.

1.3 Is Contemporary Film Criticism Irrelevant?

At this junction in my assessment of contemporary film criticism it is useful to draw on some of the ideas expressed by Armond White in Chapter 12, "*What we don't talk about when we talk about movies*". White is a vociferous critic of contemporary film criticism. He laments that both amateur and professional film critics have diminished the essential quality of "cultural discourse" (217). He describes film criticism as being in the middle of "a perfect storm of anti-intellectual prejudice" and the popular wave of disrespect for critical thinking as being factors that have led to the present state of film criticism as being "blurred with celebrity gossip" (218). White suggests that many of the existential problems that are faced by film criticism can be explained because of a failure to engage in sophisticated discourse that is relevant to society "critics don't discuss movies in ways that matter" (218). He maligns the

film critics allegiance to big budget Hollywood releases and the absence of critical reflection that leaves film criticism little more than reviewers and promoters of the most accessible film products, engaged in producing texts that are irrelevant, lacking in any meaningful connection to political or moral discourse and thus complicit in the cultivation of a culture of ignorance and “indifference” (220).

White describes these simultaneous paradoxical tendencies towards anti-intellectualism and elitism as embodying the “worst tendencies of contemporary criticism”, and suggests that it was the popularity and influence of film criticism from critics such as Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael and Roger Ebert that reduced the idea of film criticism to that of nothing more sophisticated than simple entertainment (221). White’s view of the state of contemporary film criticism is of a field that is divided between the printed and the digital with both sides failing to properly open a space for critical debate because they have built their work upon false premises. White suggests that it is the absence of critical engagement with the idea that film criticism should engage with history, politics and morality and that the operative contexts and the dialogue between a movie and society can change and are not fixed has been replaced by the idea of film criticism as an agent of the film industry, wasting their time and influence making “totems” of almost unwatchable films and neglecting the entertainment, joy, amazement, critical reflection and cinephilia that film inspires.

1.4 Not so fast Mr. White

White is scathing in his assessment of the state of contemporary film criticism where the rich interrogation and debate that existed in the past has been replaced by nothing more meaningful than what he describes as, “formula and hype” (224). White questions the value of training critics when they fail to “preserve the idea that movies must affirm our humanity?” (224). When taken in the context of contemporary film criticism, where great attention is paid

to the most spectacular and the new, on one hand White's demands appear to be petulant, outdated and from another remote time that is long past, but if he took the time to investigate videographic criticism he would find the sophisticated, rich criticism that he seeks. In the cultural space that has been created by videographic criticism, the social, political and historical context of films can be discussed and debated using the films as the subject and the medium of the discussion.

Videographic criticism offers a context and a formal means to analyse and compare films, to look at the cultural and social position of film, to record the affective changes that film brings about and the crucial difference is that in videographic criticism the reference point is presented at the same time as the argument and there is no expectation that the viewer will have a visual memory of the source. Videographic criticism stimulates and assuages the cinephiliac while reaching into the aspects of cultural criticism that White believes have been neglected by the prominent film critics.

1.5 Ontological Concerns

In the *Afterword* Cecilia Sayad suggests that it is the dual crises in both film and film criticism that have been attributed to the uncertainty and re-evaluation caused by the introduction of digital technology have led to a "rearticulation of the function, purposes and practices of critics" (243). These ontological concerns link to the broader debates that connect to the historic discussions that surround the use of digital and analogue film and the ideas of what elements constitute cinema. Frey suggests that "critics have always thought their position tenuous and undermined" and identifies their instinctive reaction to this threat to their supposed "cultural authority" (83). These are debates, that are far from resolved and will continue to divide opinions as both critics and filmmakers seek to make sense of their positions in the new era of COVID-19 cinema, the effects of which have yet to be revealed.

Sayad suggests that film criticism, as a disunified whole should seek to find the “essence” of what defines the work of the critic (246). Frey confronts the impact of the development of digital film criticism and suggests that we might refer to this as the discourse of a “digital democracy” (83). This idea aligns itself with the idea that, with regards to film criticism, the internet and the opportunities for critical interaction that it offers is, at its heart, a more democratic structure than the “old media” forms of film criticism (83). Film criticism is now more of a conversation between cinephiles than the old (patriarchal) model in which the passive consumer was told what to watch and what to think by an “authoritative critic” (91). Frey describes the current state of digital film criticism as existing in the “rhetoric of digital democracy”, offering the film lover “a more communal experience of film culture” (91).

1.6 Where is Contemporary Film Criticism?

Frey suggests that there are four main locations where film criticism is found are: Online film reviews in a traditional media context, eg. Newspaper, journal or magazine. Film information/promotion website that allow user comment and review such as *IMDB.com*. Social media that includes *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Tiktok* and *Instagram*. Aggregate websites that use algorithms to create a single rating of a film from a range of sources. This includes *Rotten tomatoes* and *metacritic*. Where does videographic criticism fit into this landscape? Frey confines his consideration to written criticism and omits to mention the possibility of videographic criticism or academic interrogation of the essential qualities of film. Omissions aside, none of the four categories suggested by Frey can definitively answer the film critics’ concerns about the imminent end of film criticism since the four categories he describes are not exhaustive, nor can responsibility for the death of film criticism be directly attributed to their collective existence.

Any attempt to account for the critic's constant concern over the impending death of film criticism could reasonably be attributed to a more likely failure to adequately describe, and thus a failure to understand and embrace the changes that have occurred in the landscape or environment of film criticism since the perceived intrusion of digital innovation. The absence of any consideration of videographic criticism is significant in that, contained in this omission is the answer to the question that film critics have agonised so long over, as they debate the impending death of their 'industry'. The answer is that film criticism has changed; it has adopted new locations, methods and modes of expression that have rendered it unrecognisable to them.

The idea of film criticism as a shrinking field that struggles to hold the attention of the ever growing film audience works only when it is viewed through the lens of the traditional print based media. The mode of address and the method of dissemination have changed, but film criticism has not disappeared, if anything, when it is considered with the technological and cultural shifts that have taken place over the last twenty years, it has massively expanded its field and its reach and most importantly its impact. The changes in mobile phone technology, data transfer speeds and allowances facilitated a shift, an adjustment in how films, media and film criticism itself was accessed by the masses. This was caused, in no small part by the switch to digital publication, but a factor that is critical to any judgement of the current state of film criticism is the idea that it has quite simply, for the most part, done nothing more than changed its appearance and has taken a form, that for some of the traditional film critics is now something that takes place in an unrecognisable and incomprehensible landscape.

The traditional film critics find themselves in a similar position today to that encountered by the monks in the 15th century that railed helplessly against the march of progress after Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press rendered their work

obsolete and unnecessary. The skills that they had practiced and honed were still prized by the privileged minority that possessed the means and the influence to access their works but for the majority, the proliferation of printed material released knowledge in a way that reshaped the way that knowledge was stored and circulated for ever. The revolution brought about by videographic criticism is similar to this shift, in that the potential to access and distribute of film criticism has moved from print to screens and the critical observations are both expressed by and absorbed into the visual language of film.

1.7 Look! It's Videographic Criticism

In *Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method*, Jason Mittell suggests that it is impossible to “ignore how the digitization of moving images has transformed” the study of the humanities, although ignoring the transformation has been the preferred position of the traditional film critics. Mittell describes videographic criticism as being “the expression of scholarly ideas via moving images and sound in audiovisual form” and connects videographic criticism as having its origins embedded in media production but eventually settling on the making use of the “norms and practices” of video essays.

As Mittell seeks to define the formal and critical differences between video essays and videographic criticism he quotes Christian Keathley's argument that it should “straddle the explanatory and poetic registers, aiming to produce a ‘knowledge effect’ composed of sound and image rather than just traditional argumentation”. It is from within this combination of Mittell's observations and Keathley's argument that videographic criticism has carved a critical niche that allows it to step into the now vacant space that was created by the decline of traditionally published forms of film criticism. The film critic is not dead. Far from it, they have simply changed their methods and mode of working.

Videographic criticism answers many of the concerns that Armond White raised in his article that I discussed earlier, “*What we don’t talk about when we talk about movies*”, where he maligns the lack of humanity and the commercially driven nature of traditional film criticism. Practitioners of videographic criticism are engaged in activities that are closer in spirit and nature to the traditional film critics but they are, for now, unhindered by the commercial and promotional concerns that have limited the film critic’s scope and attention.

Videographic criticism on the other hand, exists for the most part beyond the commercial constraints of the commercial publishers although it is being adopted by film distributors and producers. The *Criterion Collection*, *MUBI* and latterly *Netflix* have devoted significant budgets to the creation of videographic criticism and video essays in response to some of the films that they distribute. The continual collision of cinephilia with academia and the more ruthlessly commercial aspects of film have created fertile ground for critical expression. Videographic criticism creates opportunities to make and demonstrate visual comparisons that fill the void left by what Armond White perceived as a desperate lack of meaningful debate about history, culture and politics in contemporary film criticism.

Mittell asserts that videographic scholarship “has the potential to transform how we engage with, analyse and convey ideas about moving image texts” that I would contend positions videographic criticism to be the natural successor to both traditional and digital film criticism, since videographic criticism contains within it the synergy between the formal, cultural and analytical qualities whose absence White considered to be damaging to both the industry and its audiences. It is the role of film and film criticism to engage actively with cultural discourse and to guide their audiences. To enlighten and educate, in a way that encourages self-reflection, curiosity and understanding in both a local and a global sense. It is the absence of this that angers White, while Frey places the blame with the obsession with the

commercial imperative that drives the producers of both films and film criticism to be both incurious and be reluctant to challenge and question dominant ideologies and their impact.

Chapter Two: Videographic Criticism and Condensation in *Transformers: The Premake*

In this chapter I will examine the techniques that allow videographic criticism to condense critical and theoretical positions into short sequences of video. I will look at *Transformers: The Premake* in relation to Hito Steyerl's theories around the "poor image" (1). I will investigate how, as a work of cultural activism, *Transformers: The Premake* engages with Jodi Dean's theories around *Communicative Capitalism* and her ideas around the cultural shift in emphasis within communication, that took it from being primarily something that conveys a message to its transformation into something that is more akin to a mere contribution.

At first glance, it could be easy to dismiss a twenty five minute video essay because it features the fourth film in the Transformers franchise as its subject,⁶ The *Transformers* film series have received little critical acclaim and have been widely dismissed as being formulaic, unimaginative, repetitive, populated with stereotypes, but in spite of this, have nonetheless been popular with movie audiences around the world, and have delivered excellent return on investment for Paramount, the production company.⁷

2.1 The Idea of the Premake

In *Transformers: The Premake* Kevin B. Lee's attention is focused on the conditions and the impact of the location shooting and production of the fourth film in the Transformers franchise, directed by Michael Bay in 2014. This was a film with huge money making ambitions but few pretensions regarding critical ideas of what a 'good' film should be. The idea of what defines good and bad filmmaking has long been part of the landscape of critical debates on film but as I have already referenced, there is little expectation that the Hollywood

⁶ Link to the official Transformers movie website, <https://transformers.hasbro.com/en-us/movies>

⁷ Link to the box office history of the Transformers movies <https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Transformers#tab=summary>

summer release blockbuster would intrude into the realm of so-called good filmmaking. These are points which Lee elaborates upon at in his video essay.

In the twenty five minutes run time of *Transformers: The Premake*, Lee explores many different and conflicting aspects of the modern pre-cinematic experience. As the title explains in parenthesis, *Transformers: The Premake* is a desktop documentary. Lee was a pioneer of this genre that he developed with colleagues at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Since *Transformers: The Premake* emerged in 2014 the desktop-documentary format has developed as a genre of videographic criticism that integrates the performative aspects of the production of the video essay by featuring the interface of the computer hardware and software that is used in the research and the construction of the film. In the filmed introduction of a screening of *Transformers: The Premake*, Catherine Grant describes desktop documentary as using “screen capture technology to treat the computer screen as both a camera lens and a canvas” and that this example of a “desktop documentary seeks both to depict and question the ways we explore the world through the computer screen”.⁸ The desktop genre is situated within videographic criticism, the obviously located nature of its production on a laptop or PC carries with it an intimacy that delivers a curiously absorbing viewing experience.

2.2 How does Steyerl’s argument connect with *Transformers: The Premake*?

How does Steyerl’s argument connect with *Transformers: The Premake*? At almost every stage, from the selection of footage and edits and even down to the creation of the name “premake”, Lee seeks to subvert and divert attention from the finished product back towards the social and cultural context in which the Hollywood machine is making the *Transformers* movie. The idea of the premake is almost entirely a dialogue with contemporary film making

⁸ Link to Catherine Grant introducing Kevin B. Lee speaking <https://vimeo.com/123973220>.

that exists in the negative; a complete subversion of the might of the Hollywood machine. This is not a work of videographic criticism that reacts to the cinematic release of *Transformers: Age of Extinction*. It is not a reaction to the “rich image”⁹, it is not a preview or a sneak peak, it is not a trailer or a teaser, it is not offering the viewer exclusive access. In choosing the name “premake” Lee infers that this is a film that engages with the before, that which precedes the magic of Hollywood and the work of the creatives and technicians in post-production that produced the 60% of the movie that was not filmed in live-action.

As Steyerl reminds us of Juan García Espinosa’s writings in Cuba in the 1960’s in *For an Imperfect Cinema* we see that *Transformers: The Premake* is part of a dialogue within film criticism that has been going on for more than half a century. Espinosa yearns for a cinema that engages with class, division of labour and removes the barriers whether real or imagined between people, technology and the arts. He refers to an environment of creative expression where there are no clear distinctions between people that produce and consume the arts. Steyerl suggests that Espinosa predicted that the security within the hierarchy that had been enjoyed by the privileged would be threatened by a “mass film production: an art of the people” (6). This has come to pass but it is not without cost. There are many barriers to the success of “mass film production” as identified by Lee in the *Transformers: The Premake*.

Film production for its own sake has little value, whether the image is considered to be “rich” or “poor” if it does not find its audience. In the decade since *In Defense of The Poor Image* was published, technology has advanced at such a pace that films produced entirely using mobile phone have become commonplace having first appeared in 2008.¹⁰ This renders Steyerl’s assertion that the “poor” nature of the blurred films that she characterises as being

⁹ *Transformers: The Premake* was released online ten days before the premiere of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* and went on to be shown at film festivals.

¹⁰ Here is a list of the better quality films made using mobile phones . <https://momofilmfest.com/best-feature-films-shot-on-an-iphone-or-smartphone/>

“resolutely compromised” akin to a paradoxical state of obsolescence that is, at the same time, not obsolete, since defining permanence when considering images and films is almost impossible. As Steyerl observes, with the commodification and “rampant privatisation of intellectual content” brings the opportunity for “piracy and appropriation” and it is here that we find videographic criticism in the form of *Transformers: The Premake*(6).

In *Transformers: The Premake* Lee reverses or subverts the hierarchy that Steyerl identified by taking the “poor images” in the form of the YouTube clips and fan footage from the making of the Transformers movie. The “rich image” of the final edit of the movie *Transformers: Age of Extinction* is not the subject or the starting point. In *Transformers: The Premake*, Lee is concerned with the physical means and mode of production and his investigation of this reveals that there are many commercial and cultural interests that are dependent upon and encouraging the production of “poor images”. But the blurring of roles and definitions does not stop here. The clips that Lee films himself and the clips that he harvests and archives from *YouTube* here are “rich images”, they are the raw material that is the starting point from which *Transformers: The Premake* can claim its historical position as a work of complex rhetoric that expresses a strong awareness of the past and looking to the present and the future of commercial film making.

In Steyerl’s assessment of the state of the “poor image” the circulation of these images is described as becoming a “platform for a fragile new common interest and a battleground for commercial and national agendas” (6). This is an assertion that is almost impossible to refute. Lee presents us with the evidence of the labours of an army of willing and enthusiastic volunteer publicists. The spectators, in their implicit agreement to the surrender of their own personal privacy and freedom in exchange for a glimpse of an event, the filming of *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, and the opportunity to record and potentially share what they have seen, become the unwitting agents of the circulation of propaganda.

2.3 Follow the Money

Lee demonstrates that this is far from a libertarian form of filmmaking that is open to the free distribution of the amateur and not so amateur films online. The apparently egalitarian decision to allow people to observe and film the production of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* was, as Lee reveals, a carefully monitored and controlled coercive operation that was constructed with the specific intention of creating free, fan produced publicity and pre promotion of the film. Lee's research reveals that this was not a global experiment, but a geographical location specific form of crowd manipulation. The choice of locations was driven, not by a desire to best articulate the creative vision of the film's director or the production, but by a desire to exploit the local tax benefits for film producers to the absolute maximum.

The difference between the involvement of the local population between the filming locations that Lee documents is striking in the differences in access that it illustrates, but this is not only expressed in the quantity of the "poor images" that are produced (Steyerl, 1). Steyerl suggests that "poor images" are the waste products, like afterthoughts, the remnants that are left behind and are akin to driftwood that eventually finds its place only at the whims of the tides. For Steyerl the life of the poor image is far from peaceful, she refers to their exposure to "violent dislocation, transferrals" as they exist entirely at the whims of the "vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism" (1).

If read as a response to Steyerl's definition of the "rich image", *Transformers: The Premake* works within the new system of technological hierarchies and grasps the opportunity to "creatively degrade" the source film (3). This assessment can only stand as a work of resistance in this interpretation is the as yet unseen fourth Transformers film. The premise of *Transformers: The Premake* works counter to this, its premise is one of *richness*, not focused

on commercial and box office returns but on the value of dissemination, meaning and cultural relevance. *Transformers: The Premake* turns this on its head, every one of the videos that Lee includes in his video essay is imbued with meaning and relevance when positioned within the context of the video essay. There is a demand placed upon the attention of the spectator, its relevance depends upon what Steyerl refers to as the “affective condition of the crowd” and whether they have the appetite to absorb a “new perspective” (6,7). If *Transformers: The Premake* is part of the cycle of Steyerl’s ideas of “information capitalism”, it offers an alternative praxis, an inversion, since it demands contemplation, not intensity while suggesting that neither the movie nor its official previews will be worthy of the spectators attention.

As *Transformers: The Premake* unfolds it reveals how Lee arranges (or possibly curates, since it is inconceivable that there is anything on the screen that is not carefully positioned and edited) his workspace, the operating system that reveals his choice of hardware, his chosen software, his wallpaper graphic, the names of his files, the name of his external hard drive storage. The resulting video essay is a complex meditation on the product and the production environment around the fourth instalment of the Transformers film franchise.

It is Lee’s selection of audio, shots and edits that creates a challenging, fast moving viewing experience that plays with and exploits viewer expectations and preconceptions as he construct his arguments in a subtle, intelligent way while using some of the same techniques as the movie makers. Lee employs a traditional narrative structure, presenting the spectator with a video essay that gradually reveals criticism as it touches on many current cultural and historical debates. There is no voiceover but Lee manages imposes his ideas through the careful selection of clips, soundtrack and edits. In the construction of his argument Lee is gradually expounding the carefully selected aspects of the movie making process that support

his claims but this performed with an economy that only videographic criticism allows. To quote Marshall McLuhan, in *Transformers: The Premake* and in videographic criticism “the medium is the message” and it is essential we attempt to understand “the way the media work as environments” (26).

Transformers: The Premake begins with clips Lee’s *YouTube* search for the *Transformers 4* Super Bowl Trailer that, at the moment that it was captured by Lee, had already been watched more than 4 million times. The clip is on screen for no more than 11 seconds but in that time Lee reveals an enormous amount of information about the *YouTube* film, the culture that it came from and the society that it was intended to enter and become a part of the cultural discourse. In informational terms, in only 11 seconds and with the addition of the split screen, Lee reveals the position that the movie that his video essay is ostensibly ‘about’ holds within the Hollywood hierarchy. It is the extension of this capacity to condense such a range of critical perspectives and content into short sequences of film that distinguishes videographic criticism from traditional film criticism formats. The juxtaposition of the information that is contained within the windows that Lee opens on the screen, with the audio from the bombastic trailer, is both thrilling and enlightening.

Every edit and every selection that Lee makes is steeped in politics. Within the first 60 seconds Lee has referenced the North American sports viewing phenomenon that is the Super Bowl and the annual necessity for the summer blockbuster, in this case the fourth *Transformers* film to be a key part of all of the promotional jousting for attention that occurs here. He points to the notion of the popular, the mainstream and the capital investment that is required to release access to a 35 second Super Bowl premium advertising slot. He refers to the cultural expectation that the summer blockbuster movie to be trailed here at that most premium moment of cultural anticipation, every year in February, four months before the release of the film. Lee references the politics of the power that is required to influence, the

movement of capital and the need to gain the attention of the maximum number of people and create an anticipatory buzz.

As I have just richly demonstrated in the preceding paragraph, the deficiencies of attempting to draw attention to the numerous moments of criticism in text are clear. It is almost impossible to adequately express so eloquently in words, that which is contained within the screen, and I have hardly attempted to touch upon the actual images on screen.

In spite of the bluster and lustre of the high budget trailer that was created for one of the most expensive advertising opportunities in the world, Lee's use of the trailer for the cinematic release of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* is what Hito Steyerl would consider to be of those classified as the "poor image". The location beyond the realms of the cinema, appearing on television in the ad break, being shared on social media platforms and on *YouTube* that renders it irreparably so (1). This is in spite of Lee's edit of a rapid fire series of clips from a myriad of sources, when looked at through the lens of the "poor" image everything we see here is "resurrected" or "poor", (3, 1). Lee challenges the notion of the existence of a fixed hierarchy of images at every opportunity as he reveals the clips that provide the visual aspects of his argument as *Transformers: The Premake* unfolds. When judged through the lens of the "rich" or the "poor" image the finished product, *Transformers: Age of Extinction* is the "rich" image but everything in *Transformers: The Premake* argues against this (3).

2.4 Show and Tell

In *Narratology* Mieke Bal suggests that "film is an expository medium: its narrative mode is 'showing'. Its power to affect is based on showing" (40). It is this interplay between the critical and the expositional that Lee introduced to videographic criticism as a technique to layer meaning and build impact through repetition as he flags his observations and develops

his arguments through careful observation. Videographic criticism both shows and tells in order to provoke, it challenges the spectator to engage with the argument while watching the source. It challenges the spectator to remain critical and not to be distracted by the hypnotic magic of Hollywood.

Transformers: The Premake was the first example of videographic criticism to foreground the use of screen recording software as a technique. This liberated Lee to reveal some of the processes of his research as a performative aspect of the videographic criticism process. *Transformers: The Premake* is noteworthy because of both its visual and textual complexity and the running time of twenty five minutes which is long in comparison to other expressions of videographic criticism. Everything that Lee selected to place upon the screen during *Transformers: The Premake* is an illustration of the incredible capacity for condensing some very complex theoretical and critical positions into short clips that are unique to videographic criticism.

From the opening sequence Lee begins his critical commentary on the shared social and cultural history of the Transformers as a cultural entity that extends far beyond the modern movie franchise by using a still photograph of one of the original 1980's illustrated cartoon *Transformers* as wallpaper on his computer desktop. The criticism is explicit in its mindful approach to the cultural and social history of film criticism, but is positioned firmly in a context that is rooted in a cultural present that is multi-channel, multi-media, digitized, monetized and mediated. When watching *Transformers: The Premake*, the spectator follows Lee's key strokes as he searches *YouTube* for clips of *Transformers 4* filming on the streets and public spaces in Chicago. The spectator is invited to share his perspective as he navigates his customised and personalised digital environment. His cursor moves around the screen as he launches and closes apps, to the familiar sight of the Apple finder. The *Transformers: Age of Extinction* Super Bowl Trailer and its attention grabbing soundtrack is overlaid with mobile

phone footage of the shooting of the movie that is filmed by onlookers. Although Lee works without narration or voice over, he uses the multiple diegetic commentaries and excited reactions to the moviemaking spectacle that are provided by the many *YouTube* films to underline and emphasise his claims.

Comments from *YouTube* viewers appear on the screen one by one and gradually cover the screen in a collage of mostly positive interaction. The spectator is invited to share a viewing experience that blurs the boundary between the public and the personal as Lee investigates and illustrates the infiltration of the filmmaking process of *Transformers 4* into the social and cultural environment of the city of Chicago. Split screen and map views present the filming schedules and itemise how many film clips appeared on *YouTube* around the city of Chicago and in other major cities where filming took place in North America, Hong Kong and mainland China.

Although it is, at times, expressed with a degree of ambiguity, Lee is constructing a sophisticated argument from the first frame, critically pointing out the quantity, quality and range of recorded evidence of the general public's access to the film sets and mapping the locations. His edit lingers on the *YouTube* footage of the active film sets where billboards and billstickers urge the viewer to "remember Chicago" and "report alien activity" and then he zooms in on another *YouTube* film with title *Transformers 4 filming in Chicago – Propaganda Wall on Columbus Drive*. The distressed billboards and posters remind the viewer to "remember Chicago", "report alien activity", "he's watching you", and "it's watching you". The sequence ends with Lee navigating to his "Farocki" hard disk and opens a folder named "Transformers" and opens a sub folder "My Footage" that he opens to reveal a collage of *QuickTime* videos. Videographic criticism has created a critical environment where it is possible to condense an incredible amount of critical observations into two sequences that take up no more than 40 seconds on screen.

Lee presents the evidence to support his claims in short, snappy, exciting action packed clips. As Lee builds the visual spectacle into the videographic construction of his criticism a distinct line of enquiry and criticism emerges. The map views of the locations are highlighted with red lines and dots while the explosions and action from the movie set is given extra emphasis with extra graphic fireworks and explosions as Lee maps the movie production's appropriation of public spaces for the filming of the movie. *Transformers: The Premake* explodes the idea of the audience forgetting the presence of the screen; it is ever changing, familiar and intimate. The performance of the research is a technique that revels in revealing the research process.

In *Transformers: The Premake* it is the presence of multiple and multi-layered edits of images and sequences that inform and direct the viewing experience. Lee's criticism draws attention to the embodied and physical nature of the population of Chicago's experience of the making of the *Transformers* movie. Lee presents the idea of a city and its people under siege, not only in a figurative sense in that appears in the finished movie product, but also during the filming. He presents the spectator with clips of multiple helicopter stunts, closed roads, restricted access and landmarks and communal spaces under siege. The gathered crowds that populate the clips make appreciative noises and on the surface appear to be suitably impressed by the spectacle but from within the edit and selection of clips, Lee opens up a space for critical resistance that questions why the city would be so accommodating to the production of the movie and why they would and welcome the restriction of access to so many of their communal spaces.

The impact of the filming of the US/Chinese blockbuster on the city and its residents is itemised and magnified by Lee's collation of the footage that he has found on *YouTube* in carefully labelled files. For the duration of filming the city of Chicago is remodelled, controlled and re-decorated by *Transformers* fictional propaganda. In a blurring of the

boundaries between fiction and reality the city of Chicago is locked down both in the movie and in reality, menaced by the sound of helicopters and the spectacle of closed streets.

Through a careful selection of footage and themes, Lee illustrates that this is also the embodied experience of Lee himself and of the people of Chicago. Roads are closed; people are martialled, held in place. Their liberty and movements are restricted. As spectators to the filming they see explosions, destruction, helicopter stunts and movie extras running in fear for their lives from designated viewing points that they cannot easily leave.

At the running time of 3:42 there is a sequence filmed by Lee in Chicago's central business district that makes a stark case for the nature of the spectator's captive, commodified, moderated and limited viewing experience. People film the passing Transformers cars on their mobile phones and cameras from within a barricaded branch of the coffee multinational Starbucks, and as the camera pans to the left we see a crowd of people being held in place, on the street, by security guards. Most of the crowd are filming the action, which for a large portion of the time is nothing more than an empty street, but not all. The presence of one disinterested and inconvenienced member of the public stands as a point of resistance against this city administration, sanctioned lockdown.

2.5 Communicative Capitalism

The screen splits to reveal a change in focus as Lee's critical attention shifts to engage with notions around the circulation of information, attention and the commodification of communication that were explored by Jodi Dean in her 2019 essay *Communicative Capitalism and Revolutionary Form*. *Transformers: The Premake* becomes an interrogation into "complex networks" and the promotion of distraction (328). The production of a Hollywood blockbuster movie is part of a network, but is now, as Lee demonstrates, far more complex, networked and hierarchical than ever before. Lee searches online for crowdsourced

movie promotion and film fan labour along with his cursor selection and the highlighting of text to direct the spectator's attention to the possibility of a further motivation which reveals a subtext to the stimulation of the interest, excitement and disruption caused by the filming. That of the commercial utilisation of fan interest, anticipation and pre-release buzz as part of a complex and hierarchical that bestows power to those at the top of the hierarchy to develop preferential attachment that, as Lee illustrates, provides the movie maker with a commercial, promotional and cultural advantage.

Lee's critical commentary moves from the coercive nature of population and crowd management into an exploration of the capitalist exploitation of free fan labour. In a swift montage of the web searches, Lee's cursor quickly clicks, highlights and expands his browser to explain that is free publicity for commercial products that is created and shared by fans and other interested parties, he briefly highlights that the first fan generated commercial was instigated by Ford Motor Company in 2013. This is flashed on the screen for no more than 5 seconds but it is the highlighting of the need for attention that Lee's cursor carries with it that is sufficient to remind the spectator of the commercial imperatives behind the commodification and standardisation of fan responses to brands, products and franchises. I paraphrase Dean when I refer to the network that the producers of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* seek to activate as an "immanent hierarchy" (329).

The freely made choices that are made by the people that use their mobile phones, cameras and Go Pro to film what they see, while they watch the filming of the movie on the streets or from a nearby building are assist in the creation of one of the keys to the success within the "complex networks" that are "the key feature of communicative capitalism" which Dean identifies as being "the conditions in which we find ourselves" and that is "preferential attachment" (329). This fan activity and its subsequent circulation online activates the same emotional attachment to the product, in this case, anticipation of the fourth *Transformers*

movie as the studios investment in the Super Bowl advertising that I referred to earlier in this chapter. By implication, from his edits and careful selection of clips Lee makes the point that the city of Chicago and its residents have agreed to surrender their city and their freedom to move around at will in exchange for the experience of being in the environment of a Hollywood movie production which, in our commodified culture would usually be confined to a theme park or studio tour. He makes this point by the selection of a handful of clips. The spectacle and the proximity are offered as a bonus in exchange for the satisfaction of that first look, a chance to say, “I was there”.

When viewed through the lens of Dean’s theories on *Communicative Capitalism*, the activation of the future audience for the fourth Transformers film is part of a complex network in which “there is an advantage to being first – everyone else is influenced by the decisions of those who go first” and “the network structure induces competition – for attention, resources, money jobs – anything that is given a network form” Dean, 328). For Dean there are “two key points about complex networks: those who get there first have an advantage and free choice, growth and preferential attachment produce hierarchies” (329).

When this is connected to the clips that Lee finds and edits to create *Transformers: The Premake*, we see the commercial imperative behind the access that is granted to those spectators that are filming the film set. They are unpaid, providing their own hardware, using their own data allowances to circulate the clips, to assist in the magic making of the Hollywood machine. It is from this theoretical position that we can understand how the act of observing the filming of a Hollywood movie on the streets of a city that becomes a highly networked and regulated act; the presence of the spectators on the street, held in position, are on one hand, nothing more than a commodified human mass of potential promoters and consumers but on the other hand, they are part of a meticulously arranged network of communicative capitalists circulating content with no regard for the symbolism or meaning.

Lee edits comments on to the audio soundtrack and onto screen to emphasise the level of anticipation and excitement among the *YouTube* spectators for the release of the *Transformers* movie. He reveals that the spectators were not just attracted by the spectacular action sequences, stunts, the stars, the cars, trucks and pyrotechnics. Lee cuts to a scene of people filming and photographing some of the film's stars as they play football through the bars of four metre high fence. Lee zooms in on an uninterested dog as he looks at forlornly at his ball and slumps to rest at the foot of his master. This shot is interrupted and overlaid by the brief flash of a *YouTube* comment from Gavin vonhoff [sic] 'Grow up'. Lee uses this brief sequence to illustrate and reference to many differing aspects of celebrity fan culture, the banality of fame, the security that is required to separate the stars and the crew from their audience and the boredom that is experienced on both sides of the fence but it is Dean's theory on "the decline of symbolic efficiency" and the depleted nature of meaning when the images that are encouraged to circulate in communicative capitalism have no wider meaning other than their existence that protrudes. To paraphrase Dean's words, within communicative capitalism, it's not the meaning that matters, it's the affect and this has the greatest power when precise meanings are conflicting and ambiguous. Lee concisely illustrates that it is not what the *YouTube* clip shows that counts, it's all about the affect.

2.6 Not Too Exciting

Lee continues to develop his argument in the *Transformers: The Premake* filling the screen with a map that illustrates the filming schedule as it moves to Utah, Texas and then to Detroit. Lee directs the spectator's attention towards the people that are keen to share their filmed sightings on *YouTube* with diegetic commentary as they describe what they see and attempt to rationalise what they see and respond to the use of public resources to protect private assets as they describe being held in roadblocks and seeing the *Transformers* props and crew moving with police escorts. As the production moves to Detroit in July 2013 *Transformers: The*

Premake takes on the tone of a movie trailer. Lee uses action movie tension build up riffs intercut with the text “A WORLD FULL OF ADVENTURE” that is followed by footage of people standing at the side of an empty road. Lee introduces Ref Marquez on *YouTube* and his “FIRST LOOK AT THE BIG EXPLOSION” film which turns out to be a smoke cloud behind a large building, text on screen reads “NOT TOO EXCITING BUT IT WAS SOMETHING”.

Lee’s repetition of potentially pointless clips and the emphasis that he places on the banal nature of the distant view of very little happening calls back to Dean’s notion of the “decline of symbolic efficiency” and the emptiness of the need to circulate something or anything just in case there might be some “primacy of affect in sharing” somewhere, which leads to the question, why is it here? The repetition is another technique that can be used in videographic criticism to remind and to provoke the spectator to look again. Affect may be the purpose of the circulation of the clips but within *Transformers: The Premake* every clip, every search is positioned to provoke a critical response. In this case it is to remind the spectator of the multiple locations to provoke further questions. Why Chicago, and why Detroit?

Transformers: The Premake prepares the spectator for juxtaposition by returning to the map that illustrates the locations of one hundred and fifteen *YouTube* videos in Detroit. A clip of a monorail and an explosion near Chinese advertising hoardings, blocked roads and distant explosions in Detroit cuts to on street filming in Hong Kong. There is a distinct visual and tonal change in the footage, the crowds appear to be less compliant, the footage is lower quality, more grainy, and at first glass it appears that the commenters and amateur filmmakers are closer to the action, almost close enough to be part of it. Neon green subtitles at the top of the screen to translate the conversations that are taking place in Mandarin during filming. The spectators discuss the business and the benefits of 3D filmmaking. We see and hear the vexed

figure of the director of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* Michael Bay shouting as he marches up the street with a loud hailer in hand, neon green subtitles elaborating on his use of foul language and frustration as he throws his handset to the ground. As the spectators chat among themselves, Lee provides us with a translation and underpins the answers with a split screen featuring eleven views of the same event. The words, ‘there are cameras everywhere’ covers the centre of the screen. Lee cuts to the next shooting location just as the action begins. With these edits he directs our focus from the spectacle of the movie to the movie making spectacle.

The action in *Transformers: The Premake* moves to mainland China, to the Wulong Karst Geological Park in November 2013. Again, Lee employs repetition to encourage comparison and to juxtapose the movie making conditions in the different countries by utilising the same map and numerical graphic design that he used to document the filming schedule in the US. The first location on the Chinese mainland is documented by seven videos.

2.7 “The propaganda *Transformers* gives us will greatly benefit our business!”

At this point the tone and tempo of the online footage that Lee found takes a stylistic shift and takes on a formal tone. Lee cuts to what looks like news footage covering an official opening ceremony/press conference. The audio commentary here is provided by the voice of a Chinese television news reporter. Subtitles discuss the “ground-breaking” presence of a Chinese actress in a Hollywood blockbuster and the impact of the filming on the local traders. In an interview, a souvenir trader refers to the potential boost to visitor numbers and welcomes the boost that filming *Transformers* will bring to her small enterprise. “The propaganda *Transformers* gives us will greatly benefit our business!” Lee cuts to a media interview with Michael Bay in the park location that reveals a defensive, insecure man asserting that it was

his idea to film at the beauty spot and that he is motivated by the desire to make a good film, not by potential profits at the box office. Again, it is the power of videographic criticism to condense and highlight complex ideas into short sequences of film.

The Beijing leg of the *Transformers: Age of Extinction* filming juggernaut has only two videos. A text box appears on screen Lee types, in capitals, ‘ZERO AMATEUR VIDEOS FOUND IN MAINLAND CHINA’. As videographic criticism, this format gives Lee the environment where he can simultaneously show and tell, to demonstrate his argument effectively, as the affect of the viewing experience accumulates. Behind the words on the screen are the implicit comment and the explicit comparisons between the social and political filming environments in the different filming locations underpinned by the constant question of why is *Transformers: The Premake* being filmed in these specific locations?

The repetition of the word propaganda raises the critical question; what is it that constitutes propaganda in this case, is it the filming of the movie production, the movie production or the finished product. As *Transformers: The Premake* progresses Lee makes an argument for all three. Lee is using the found footage and the lack of found footage to form a visual comparison without making any suggestion as to why this is the case, but the criticism is ever present. The footage that he has selected and edited speaks for him as he cuts to footage taken from *YouTube* that features a cocktail party in a 7 star Hotel. The audio commentary here is provided by a Chinese newsreader with English subtitles. The Chinese leading lady is filmed on the stage surrounded by men in suits. The actor, Bingbing describes her admiration for the director of *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, Michael Bay, to which he replies (in English) that they will be getting married in May. This is met with a world weary eye roll from Bingbing. Lee interrupts this full screen footage with a text box that he uses to type that the on screen logo on the top left of the screen is the “<-OFFICIAL MOVIE FAN SITE OF THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT”. This text on screen intervention from Lee offers

direct criticism on the preceding scenes. In *Transformers: The Premake* Lee presents visual evidence in support of his argument with his selection of clips and minimal exposition with his use of onscreen text.

As Mieke Bal suggests in *Narratology* when discussing the “four different principles” that collaborate to create narratives it is based upon the “repetition, accumulation, relations to other characters, and transformations” (124). Lee employs these devices “a means of mapping out the familiarities and oppositions between characters” (124). The characters that Lee develops in *Transformers: The Premake* are the act of filmmaking in the two continents. He calls upon the spectator to question the circumstances that lead to two contrasting depictions of shooting the same film, and it is in this act of drawing the viewer’s attention to the juxtaposition that the questions that Lee will ask later in the film.

Transformers: The Premake continues with a middle aged Chinese man in a suit listing the film’s corporate investors addressing an audience from a stage, expressing his hope that *Transformers 4* will be the highest grossing film of 2014.¹¹ The corporate theme continues with a middle aged American man in a suit on the cable news broadcaster CNN, discussing the size of movie going audiences and the fact that China has the fastest expanding audience in the world and is building 10 cinemas a day. He refers to the foreign movie cap that was set at 34 imported films per year. It is at this point that Lee’s argument becomes explicit: *Transformers: The Premake* is less about the cinematic thrills of the explosions, the CGI and the action and more about the business suit wearing, money making, decision making machine that stands behind all decision making in *Transformers: Age of Extinction*.

Lee emphasises his argument through exposition in a clip of another American man in a suit from *China View* describes how the Chinese Government look favourably upon films

¹¹ This was not to be the case, but *Transformers: Age of Extinction* did manage to take the 5th place.. <https://www.the-numbers.com/market/2014/top-grossing-movies>

that have no content that is critical of the ruling party and that there is a strong preference for films that spread their propaganda favourably. The speaker describes ambiguous “other expectations” and refers to the power of an uncritical stance as encouraging “cultural connection”. This sequence calls back to the interview with Michael Bay in the national park where he awkwardly claimed ownership of the choice of location and artistic decision making in the movie. The multi-screen section discusses the influence of Chinese mythology on the design of one of the lead characters in the film.

In *Transformers: The Premake*, Lee has revealed some of the intricacies of the financial, political cultural motivations that lay behind the decision making processes that motivated the producers of *Transformers: Age of Extinction*. By using found and self-filmed footage and the addition of his own screen recorded searches, Lee has created sophisticated film criticism using videographic techniques. The techniques he has used are scholarly in nature. The performative display of the processes of his interrogation and the methods that he employs to challenge and question the visual evidence are as comprehensive as is written criticism but it is in the compact delivery that the format of videographic criticism creates that allows Lee to cover this broad range of concerns in only 25 minutes.

Lee directs spectator attention to the collaboration between Paramount and the *Chinese Movie Channel* to find a number of Chinese actors by using the televised talent show format. The voiceover describes show’s search to find ‘a sexy goddess’, ‘a tech geek’, ‘a lovely Lolita’ and ‘a stylish action man’. Lee intercuts this with the man in the suit that spoke euphemistically about the need to make culturally connected films as he celebrates this as being, ‘one of the greatest things that film can do, it can bring cultures closer together’ over the images that reveal that the talent show is simply looking for regressive, conservative, unchallenging and conservative outdated stereotypes that can be used for proliferation of the same old uninspired repetition of tired cinematic tropes. Lee’s careful selection of contrasting

clips reveals the role that *Transformers 4* is taking in cultural discourse, is not what was once regarded as the West's attempts at cultural imperialism, (the spreading of pro-democracy and pro free market ideals), but are now regarded as mutually beneficial creative collaborations.

Lee has constructed a clear position that comments critically on the creative concessions that the producers and director of *Transformers 4* have made in order to bypass the Chinese government's foreign film quota in exchange for access to the world's fastest growing cinema audience.

Transformers: The Premake rewards the spectator for their tolerance of the investigation into the business side of film making by a swift action sequence that sees the heroic leading man being stereotypically heroic, while Transformers fly through the air and vehicles explode overlaid with Chinese text. A *Vogue* magazine cover with a Chinese model on the front slowly comes into focus with an enthusiastic American voiceover that introduces the Detroit Raw Show on *YouTube* films the action from a nearby building. Although the buildings, advertising hoardings look Chinese this filming is taking place in Detroit. The *YouTube* user MrSan44Man speaks of Detroit as being broke and bankrupt but nonetheless proudly hosting filmmakers. He zooms in on the Paramount disclaimer board that informs bystanders that by being in the vicinity of the filming they agree to have their likeness used. In his narration MrSan44Man claims exclusive access and proudly announces that he has given his business card to the producer and director.

2.8 Follow the Taxpayer's Money

Transformers: The Premake returns to the screen recorded investigation into why Detroit is being used as a filming location. Lee highlights the \$20million dollars in tax incentives that the production company, Paramount received from the city of Detroit in vivid yellow. The screen fills again with open search windows that look at the percentages, the projected

number of jobs that the film industry will create and briefly reveals a critical comment on the tax payer being “ripped off” by Hollywood. Lee devotes a full screen sequence to the high quality production of the Michigan Tax Credit PSA *YouTube* video. The ‘keep it rolling’ campaign implores the city not to withdraw the film subsidy and shut down movie making in Detroit. This short sequence answers some of the questions about why the producers chose the specific locations that were raised earlier in *Transformers: The Premake* using clips that Lee found on *YouTube*.

Transformers: The Premake returns to MrSan44Man as he brags about his exclusive access to the Detroit film set that is quickly disproved by Lee using Google Earth as he reveals the uploaded films from three other *YouTube* users in the area at that time. In this 10 second segment, using the words of the *YouTube* users and their subscribers, Lee comments the politics of exclusivity, of access and of truth and integrity. Lee then zooms in on the film uploaded by Jerry48192 and notes and highlights the *Digital Millennium Copyright Act* and highlights the comment that any copies of his films will be removed from *YouTube*, as they have been before. Screen recording or Lee’s investigations continue. He scrolls past *YouTube* user comments and pauses on the question “are these videos monetized?” *YouTube* user Jerry48192 replies “yes”. The question of whether the user is paid by Paramount remains unanswered.

Transformers: The Premake returns to the web link from adubspyder, Lee finds that the video has been removed by Paramount pictures because of copyright issues. Screen recording captures Lee typing and sending a message through *YouTube*. The viewing experience in the full screen, desktop moments of the videographic essay are intensely personal and have an almost haptic quality. The experience of watching a desktop video essay on a laptop or pc screen is immersive but this experience is not fixed or specific to *Transformers: The Premake*. The decision of where and how to view the video essay defines

and delineates the range and reach of the viewing experience. When viewing on a laptop or PC it is possible to find yourself attempting to scroll or select the on screen content, to zoom in or out or to influence the content, to mistake it for your own screen. The blurring of lines and the interchangeable nature of the viewing experience are disconcerting and yet familiar. The extraction of the videos and the real-time recording of Lee's screen as he researches edits and compiles the clips from their various sources is a challenge to the corporate and commercial structures as they attempt to control the experience of the viewer and now the captive population among whom they work.

The critical commentary becomes explicit as the spectator sees the process of researching the blocked videos with Lee. When he finds a film that has been removed he navigates his cursor to his own digital archive and plays his saved *QuickTime* version of the now deleted video. In the case of the Damen Towers footage, the removal appears to be motivated by the producer, Paramount's desire not to have videos that depict the Chinese flag flying in America circulating on *YouTube*. This investigation is positioned over the "Transformers are Dangerous" wallpaper from the movie franchise's diegetic propaganda.

Transformers: The Premake becomes a first person, point of view video essay as Lee films his own responses to being given aggressive and clear instructions on how to quickly leave the area where the film is being shot on the streets of Chicago. *Transformers: The Premake* returns to full screen desktop format to reveal a reply from adubspyder, in which he offers a description of the removed video. Lee highlights a sentence of the description in yellow and consults his personal archive to reveals that the deleted video actually depicted an entirely different scene that he then uploads to *YouTube*. This moment of exposition is carefully positioned as a technique of indirect repetition to underline Lee's earlier assertion that not everything that surrounds the production of *Transformers: The Premake* is presented honestly.

2.9 Meanwhile, back at the ranch

Transformers: The Premake calls upon repetition as a visual hook that returns the spectator to the sequence of the film that was filmed in the Chicago central business district branch of Starbucks where people were being held to avoid interrupting the filming. The spectator is presented with an alternative view of the events that featured earlier. Lee focuses the viewer's attention to the only person in the crowd that was not filming or watching the empty street in anticipation of the action. The disinterested man eventually moved impatiently to defy the security and ignored the people management measures to cross the road. The commonplace action of a citizen crossing road when placed in the context of *Transformers: The Premake* becomes an event. An onlooker says "he just went rogue". This small act of corporate and cultural defiance became a *YouTube* video called "Dry Cleaning Man Defies Transformers".¹² Here Lee's criticism calls to mind the Deleuzian idea of a "society of control" and illustrates the active and passive forces in which "controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other" (Deleuze, 4). "Dry Cleaning Man" is beyond the control of the film production company, the crowd that is gathered in anticipation and the city of Chicago that has agreed to subsidise this intrusion into its citizens lives. He rejects their control but there is no absolute here, "Dry Cleaning Man" in spite of his apparently rogue behaviour is not beyond the control of the system, nobody is. He operates within the same system but for a split second, in a different way, as he transgresses temporary societal barriers to achieve his unspecified goal.

Transformers: The Premake demands that we remember Chicago when the production of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* takes over the City because of the offer of millions of dollars of tax benefits. The agreement that the tax benefits be paid into the film making economy of the location in turn demands that the (tax paying) residents of a city be

¹² Dry Cleaning Man Defies Transformers <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmsn0kcpAq4>

restricted, commodified and held in place both figuratively by the action and literally by the barriers placed before them. Now the society of control is such that the city of Chicago expects their residents to embrace the opportunity to pay their taxes to corporations to influence their communal, spatial experiences. That the man with the dry cleaning is the only person that disobeys is magnified by its presence in *Transformers: The Premake*, a small act of necessary resistance.

2.9.1 An Interrogation into the Influence of Corporations on Filmmaking

The next sequence of *Transformers: The Premake* attends to the idea of the movie director. A brief clip filmed from behind the director Michael Bay as he looks at the Chicago landmark, the Willis Tower, (formerly Sears), from a *YouTube* film entitled *What Will He Blow Up Next?*¹³ What follows is an interrogation into the corporate influence on filmmaking in a film with the title “*Michael Bay Teleprompter Fail at Samsung CES*” that shows the uncomfortable moment when the teleprompter at a technology industry conference stops working and Michael Bay completely fails to articulate what the nature of his work as a film director is and quickly leaves the stage. Naturally this prompted a flurry of mocking *YouTube* videos that form a mosaic on the screen.

The audio of Bay’s meltdown is edited into a song in Final Cut Pro. This edit ends with Bay saying sorry which appears over the transformers mouth that explodes and then covers his and our screen with his library of hundreds of *QuickTime* films of the many explosions in *Transformers 4*. This sequence eloquently illustrates the creative deficiencies of Bay as a film director. Film criticism has celebrated the idea of the director as having a strong, creative vision since auteur theory arose in the 1940’s and in *Transformers: The Premake* the

¹³ What Will He Blow Up Next? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SELHrYrTdf0>

criticism is clear, there is little expectation that Bay will be celebrated as an auteur anytime soon.

Transformers: The Premake ends with a credits sequence that appears to have been recorded in real time. The typed credits begin with the statement *Transformers: The Premake* is in memory of Roger Ebert and Shellie Fleming. “They didn’t just watch movies. They watched how movies work, in the world, in our lives”. As the credits are typed on the right of the screen, the rest of Lee’s desktop is a multi-screen, overlaid montage of videos that reveal different perspectives on the videos we have just watched during *Transformers: The Premake*. If the viewer looks beyond the action, Lee’s Hard disk is called *Adorno* and his External HD is called *Farocki*. Lee refers us to his interests beyond *Transformers* and offers the spectator a subtle invitation to learn more by researching his interests. The folder below Lee’s storage is called *Transformers*. The credits sequence ends with a female voice suggesting “we should tape this”.

Throughout *Transformers: The Premake*, an example of videographic criticism that explicitly tracks and documents the making of the fourth film in the Transformers franchise, Lee is implicitly calling upon the viewer to be careful with their attention, to be sparing with their time, to discriminate; to resist the invasion of the Transformers into their attention, their space and most importantly into their tax paying, movie ticket and merchandise buying wallets. Lee carefully documents the citizens that are held in their positions that are authorised by the dual forces of the host city and the Paramount legal team. He documents the *YouTube* users and the spectators that are watching and recording the action and he reminds us to keep asking questions.

Lee signals that there is an explicit presumption of agreement and collaboration with the movie making monolith. This attempt to redirect the spectators attention is present in

every fact that Lee provides, whether that is the number of films that appear on *YouTube* of that particular day's shooting or the many filming locations. They are all there to provoke the viewer to ask questions. As Lee unpacks the many layers of detail that demand our attention he reveals more aspects of the social, political and cultural atmosphere around the production of international blockbusters.

If I was to attempt to summarise *Transformers: The Premake* I would suggest that it is a cautionary tale, a warning not to waste our attention on the undeserving. The implicit subtext is one of re-direction and a call for a more critical use of our time and attention. Lee implores us to watch where the *Transformer* films are filmed. The spectator should endeavour to be more discerning in their decision making, where they direct their attention and, like the producers of the franchise, they should follow the money. By this I mean research the tax breaks that subsidise the production, ask where this money comes from, could it be spent better elsewhere and ask why it helps to facilitate the lockdown of swathes of their cities. The viewer should challenge the (mis)use of public funds when the police provide security services to the producers of Hollywood movies. We should challenge our expectations, not casually submit to being trapped in cafés in exchange for a glimpse of the 'magic of Hollywood'.

In *Transformers: The Premake* Lee urges the viewer to re-think expectations of what a movie director should be and that it is not unreasonable to expect the director of a movie to have the vocabulary to articulate just what it was they were doing and how the movie might engage with the audience on a human level. *Transformers: The Premake* implores us to question the cynical techniques and the sacrifices of quality and standards that are used by corporations to access the lucrative Chinese cinema market. *Transformers: The Premake* advises the spectator not to join the herd, but to watch the herd, to be "dry cleaning man". To question everything, to watch out for propaganda, question it, probe it and deepen the critical

nature of any attention that is paid. Lee implores us to ask ‘why?’ To challenge every restriction that is placed on public access to public spaces, to challenge the motives that lie behind every decision to spend public funds supporting private enterprise, to be curious about every corporate decision that impacts entire cities and to challenge every compromise that has to be made for the offer of vantage. *Transformers: The Premake* urges the spectator to ask why is there no footage filmed by the public in China, why are some films removed from *YouTube*, how many of the ‘fan films’ are paid and finally the question that troubles me the most, why the lies and the deception?¹⁴ Is it really all just about cold hard cash?

¹⁴ *Transformers: The Premake* was briefly available on Youku before it was removed and has been exhibited in “the BANK gallery in Shanghai and the Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou” (Lee, 221).

Conclusion

This thesis has been an attempt to examine contemporary film criticism and to position videographic criticism within this expanded field. I was keen not to get mired in the semantics of attempting to define the many different labels that are attached to film criticism that is expressed visually and focused my attention on videographic criticism in the form of the video essay. I hoped to successfully argue that videographic criticism presents the spectator with an innovative and effective way to engage with film criticism and theory.

In Chapter One I examined contemporary film criticism and found a highly populated but not particularly influential gathering of disappointed and jaded practitioners that were more concerned with obsessing over their place in the world rather than dealing with the business of film criticism. The writing of Mattias Frey, Cecilia Sayad and Armond White led me to conclude that contemporary film criticism has numerous pressing concerns but perhaps the most urgent is that of relevance. Through failure to pay proper attention to the needs and interests of the modern spectator and a stubborn attachment to their perceived status, practitioners of traditional film criticism have quite simply failed to keep up with the changes in attention, interest and curiosity that the digital revolution has brought.

In Chapter Two I examined the techniques and methods that Kevin B. Lee used to create *Transformers: The Premake*. I paid particular attention to his creation of a complex narrative piece that is in dialogue with Jodi Dean's ideas around Communicative Capitalism and circulation and Hito Steyerl's theories on the poor image. As a pioneer in the genre of screen recording in video essayism, *Transformers: The Premake* is visually innovative and dense with theory. If the fundamental purpose of film criticism is to enhance the depth and the quality of the spectator's engagement with the medium and to change the way they look at the subject or the source, I would conclude that the best location for this is the scholarly works of videographic criticism. On one hand *Transformers: The Premake* can be read as a comment on the globalisation and cynicism of blockbuster movie production but on the other hand the use of fan videos and original footage from the film trailer has created an excitingly rich video essay that could be watched for pleasure while simply enjoying the spectacle.

As I near the end of this process I realise there is still so much more to unpack in *Transformers: The Premake*. I would like to continue my research on *Transformers: The Premake*, with a focus on the ideas around post-cinema in relation to videographic criticism. If time allowed I would like to spend more time investigating the Chinese version of *YouTube*, *Youku* and expand upon my knowledge of global videographic criticism that is liberated from the strong Anglo-centrism of *YouTube* and *Vimeo*.¹⁵ There is so much more to unpack and I would like to deepen my examination with theory and practice, eventually making videographic criticism to illustrate my ideas on this subject. Although I am less interested in the didactic approach to videographic criticism, after my research endeavours on this subject I firmly believe that this thesis would have been far more interesting to the spectator as an example of videographic criticism than it is as a written thesis. Ultimately, my conclusion is that the methods that practitioners of videographic criticism use to condense

¹⁵ Link to the Chinese version of *YouTube*, *Youku* <https://www.youku.com/>.

ideas and theories into short sequences of video have created the perfect medium to interrogate audiovisual media. The immediacy and the compactness of the medium allows the spectator of videographic criticism to watch a video that will stimulate curiosity and allow them to achieve a near instant critical connection with film theory, while simultaneously being affected and experiencing the impact of the source film. The magic of videographic criticism is in this very condensation and the presentation of subject, theory and argument simultaneously. It creates an experience for the spectator that is rich and stimulates by creating a reflexive space, for thought and contemplation.

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